

Welcome to St Petersburg

*Once a desolate swamp, Russia's
imperial capital is today a
dazzling metropolis whose sheer
grandeur never fails to amaze.*

City of the Tsars

Built from nothing by westward-looking Peter the Great, St Petersburg was from its inception to be a display of imperial Russia's growing status in the world. Fine-tuned by Peter's successors, who employed a host of European architects to add fabulous palaces and cathedrals to the city's layout, St Petersburg grew to be the Romanovs' showcase capital and Russia's first great, modern city. It has retained this status despite the capital moving back to Moscow following the revolution. Despite all that history has thrown at it, St Petersburg still feels every bit the imperial capital, a city largely frozen in time.

Venice of the North

Whether you're cruising the elegant canals, crossing one of the city's 342 bridges or watching ships on the mighty Neva River at night, you're never far from water in St Petersburg. With the historic centre's canals lined by Italianate mansions and broken up by striking plazas adorned with baroque and neoclassical palaces, it's unsurprising that the city is often compared to Venice.

Artistic Powerhouse

St Petersburg is an almost unrivalled treasure trove of art and culture. You can spend days in the Hermitage, seeing everything from Egyptian mummies to Picassos, while the Russian Museum, spread over four sumptuous palaces, is perhaps the best collection of Russian art in the world. Add to this world-class ballet and opera at the Mariinsky Theatre, classical concerts at the Shostakovich Philharmonia and a slew of big-name music festivals over the summer months, and you won't be stuck for cultural nourishment. If contemporary art is more your thing, there's also the fantastic Erarta Museum, showcasing the best in modern Russian art, and a small but buzzing gallery scene.

White Nights

The city's White Nights are legendary: those long summer evenings when the northern sun barely dips below the horizon. Revelry begins in May, when spring finally comes to the city and parks are filled with flowering trees, and peaks in mid-June, when the sky doesn't get dark, festivals pack out concert halls and the entire city seems to be partying over the brief but glorious summer. But don't worry – even when the skies are grey and the ground covered in snow, St Petersburg's rich culture still dazzles and delights.



Why I Love St Petersburg

By Tom Masters, Author

There is something about St Petersburg that gets under your skin. Despite preferring Moscow when I first came to Russia almost two decades ago, St Petersburg lingered; its colours and incredible light stayed with me, its history haunted me. When I came to live in Russia in 2000, I didn't hesitate in choosing St Petersburg. Today what excites me about the city is the growing underground art and music scene, the hedonistic atmosphere and the sense that great things are once again happening here. The city has emerged from Moscow's shadow and will, I hope, show you a very different side to modern Russia.

For more about our authors, see p272.